

Super GRASSES

Packed with ornamental grasses, late-season perennials and specimen trees and shrubs, Knoll Gardens is a feast for the senses in autumn - and a haven for wildlife too ▶

PHOTOGRAPHS MARIANNE MAJERUS | WORDS AMBRA EDWARDS

The *Ginkgo biloba* planted around 70 years ago is now a magnificent specimen. Its leaves turn butter yellow in autumn.



LEFT, FROM TOP *Euonymus europaeus* 'Red Cascade', *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Ferner Osten'; the hips of *Rosa glauca*.

RIGHT Part of the gravel garden, which is planted with grasses. **BELOW RIGHT** Grasses and late-season perennials surround the pool in the dragon garden.

When Neil Lucas was a lad, he wanted to be a zookeeper. By the time he was in his teens, plants had become his first love - and now, four decades on, he is respected as one of Britain's leading plantsmen and a world authority on grasses. But as he threads his way between its silky plumes and billowing hummocks, Neil wonders if he hasn't come full circle. For the garden he has created here at Knoll, on the sandy heaths of Dorset, has become as important to him for the birds and beasts it supports as for the stateliness and munificence of its planting.

It wasn't what he set out to do at all. When he came here exactly 20 years ago,

**GARDEN
NOTES**
Four-acre,
low-maintenance,
late-season garden

Grasses are easy to maintain, giving interest for 10 months of the year, and introducing dynamism

he found a very different garden, but one rich in exciting botanical specimens. It was planted from the early 1970s by John May, a passionate plantsman who had turned an empty carrot field into an exotic arboretum. When May moved to Scotland, other owners took the garden on, adding some formal features and decking it out with bedding schemes in a bid to attract a waning tourist trade.

Neil didn't have the will or the manpower to bed out double begonias. And besides, he was already in love with grasses. After years as a public-sector landscaper, he already knew the utility of grasses - they're easy to maintain, giving interest for a good 10 months of the year, and introducing

dynamism and movement to the landscape. So the bedding went, as did the peaky rhododendrons that could only be kept alive by a massive effort on the garden's thin, sandy soil; for Neil is a passionate believer in 'right plant, right place', and thinks it madness for gardeners to try to turn nature on its head.

The trees that were doing well were given air, and now the garden is full of magnificent specimens - cork oak and silver maple, and stands of mighty eucalyptus that fill the air with their fragrance. An outsize whitebeam (*Sorbus intermedia*) groans with berries, while a ginkgo has shot up like a gorgeous golden firework. Neil has carried on May's tradition of experimental



planting. Some of the most exciting specimens in the garden are shrubs that he found languishing unlabelled in a forgotten corner: the Australian snowdrop tree, *Atherosperma moschatum*; ferny *Polyscias sambucifolia*; the paper mulberry *Broussonetia papyrifera*; and the Chile Lantern tree, *Crimodendron hookerianum*.

And in came more and more grasses, and their close relatives rushes and sedges, as Neil experimented with different ways of planting and grouping them, and tested their tolerance of different conditions. The garden is constantly evolving, as he goes on trying out new things - new recipes for shade planting, and new interpretations of meadow planting. 'There is so much to learn about plants,' Neil says. 'One lifetime isn't nearly long enough.'

Today, Knoll's four closely planted acres present a living lecture on the drama and endless adaptability of grass. Narrow paths ►



TOP LEFT Paths wind through displays of bright scarlet *Euonymus alatus*, hardy fuchsia and evergreen *Anemathele lessoniana*. **BELOW LEFT** A spot to sit in front of swathes of *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Little Kitten' and *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Ferner Osten'. **RIGHT, FROM TOP** A beautiful cascade in the water garden; a unique seedling of *Euonymus europaeus* in a clearing of miscanthus including *M. sinensis* 'Flamingo' and *M. sinensis* 'Ferner Osten'; a spreading aster species grows alongside *Panicum virgatum* 'Hänsle Herms' and a unique miscanthus seedling awaiting naming.



gardeners: cutting out jobs you don't have to do makes more time for the ones you do. And it has also proved beneficial for wildlife.' Neil says he has never deliberately chosen a food plant for the holly blue butterfly, but one year Knoll was found to have the highest recorded number of them in a Dorset-wide survey. 'We once counted 50 species of moth in a single night,' he says. 'It's how the garden is gardened that makes the difference - because the borders are larger, and because we're not treading on them everyday, raking and clearing and hoeing, the environment can get on with it.'

What Neil loves most about the garden is how it is different every day. Right now, it is at its autumn *crescendo* - the spindles bejewelled in scarlet and pink, the borders rattling with seedheads and rippling with airy plumes of purple, beige and gold. All year, since the March cutback, it's been building to this point; the thrill of the first



snake through areas of woodland, opening suddenly to broad, sunny lawns, skirted round with deep banks of grasses arranged in rhythmic masses. A gently undulating gravel garden groups grasses in an airy, understated Mediterranean planting; while the dragon garden goes for the big and bold effect, with towering grasses and late-season perennials laid out in loose blocks around a formal circular pool.

'There's no style of gardening that isn't improved by a grass,' maintains Neil. They bring life to the modern, minimalist garden. In the Arts and Crafts garden, they are the perfect antidote to the crisp box hedge. Tall upright grasses like *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster' make excellent hedges in their own right. 'Or take a 300-year-old manor house - before lawnmowers came along, the grass would have been long, so using ornamental grasses is only taking it one step further.'

'We don't spray or deadhead - we don't need to. I haven't used fertiliser for a couple of decades'

But the idiom that is closest to his heart is the naturalistic style that has been evolving at Knoll for the past decade or more, in which native plants and flowering perennials combine with grasses to create balanced but largely self-sustaining communities. 'We all know that a garden is not nature,' says Neil. 'It's kidology. But what we can do is to attempt to follow the most important principles that we see operating in nature, choosing plants that are adapted to the conditions that we are able to give them and, as far as possible, leaving them well alone.'

'We don't spray or stake or deadhead - we don't need to. I haven't used fertiliser for a couple of decades. That's good for

new shoots, then shapely mounds of green providing a backdrop for perennials, then the grasses seizing centre stage and entering their season of glory. 'Soon, they'll start fading into golds, and the winter symphony of browns,' Neil says. 'There's no greater beauty than the quiet beauty of plants just doing what they do naturally.'

Knoll Gardens, Stapehill Road, Hampreston, Wimborne BH21 7ND. The garden and nursery are open Tuesday to Saturday, 10am-5pm (4pm November to March); closed Sundays and Mondays (except bank holidays). Tel: +44 (0)1202 873931. www.knollgardens.co.uk



Turn over for Neil's grasses tips ►

KNOLL GARDENS NOTEBOOK



GRASSES FOR POTS

Many grasses grow successfully in pots, such as *Sesleria autumnalis* (above left), handsome red-tinged Japanese blood grass (*Imperata cylindrica* 'Rubra', centre) and *Hakonechloa macra* (above right).

GARDEN CHALLENGES

DRY SHADE: There are more woody plants in the garden than grasses, so Neil is learning a great deal about shade planting. 'It's a useful discipline, because most gardeners have some shade. Paradoxically, plants from wet conditions like *Carex* and *Luzula* have proven to do best in dry shade.'



SUNNY DELIGHT

Neil is delighted with *Pennisetum* 'Short Stuff', his own selection of *P. macrourum* that is not only a better scale for the average garden at 60-90cm tall rather than 1.5-1.8m, but much more reliable in flower. Like its parent, it likes a sunny, well-drained position.



GROUP ACTIVITY

Grasses have difficult names that can put people off, Neil says. 'But if you just learn the main groups, that's all you need. *Miscanthus* is tall with dense, fluffy flowers. *Panicum* has millions of tiny flowers, giving a cloud-like effect. *Pennisetum* makes a rounded, more solid mass, with long brushy flowers. *Calamagrostis* is tall and upright. Each has a different shape, so whichever cultivars you choose, combine one from each group and you can't go wrong.'

NEIL LUCAS' TOP GRASSES TIPS

- **'Right plant, right place'** must be your motto. Work out what your garden conditions are, then select your plants to suit. They'll do the work for you.
- **One plant of *Carex divulsa*** is beautiful; six plants are more beautiful still. Work to the biggest scale you can, remembering that less is more.
- **Spring is the time to move** or divide grasses, and to cut deciduous grasses to the ground. Other than mulch, that's all the maintenance they need.
- **Chop standing grasses and perennials** into 30cm lengths with a hedge-cutter and just leave the debris where it falls. The resulting mulch will benefit the plant, and the patchwork quilt effect that is produced will make an attractive pattern on the ground until the new growth comes through.
- **Leave well alone** - grasses don't need fiddling with, and the less you interfere with them, the sooner you will have built up a wildlife-friendly ecosystem in your garden.



ALSO IN THE AREA

If you are visiting Knoll, Neil recommends:

- **NURSERY Koirin Azalea Centre** Outstanding grower of azaleas, with an excellent selection of rare, unusual and evergreen varieties. Woodlands, near Verwood, Wimborne BH21 8LN. Tel: +44 (0)1202 824629. www.azaleacentre.co.uk
- **NURSERY Trehane Nursery** Leading authority on camellias, and also pioneers in the growing of blueberries, with the UK's first commercial plantation and pick-your-own. Wimborne BH21 7ND. Tel: +44 (0)1202 873490. www.trehane.co.uk
- **WILDLIFE Ferndown Common** Beautiful area of heathland and ponds, home to rare sand lizards, grasshoppers, butterflies and the Dartford Warbler as well as handsome heathers and molinias - the native versions of grasses growing at Knoll. Ferndown, Dorset. www.sssi.naturalengland.org.uk